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Common Sense

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TEN MINUTES ADVICE

TO THE

PEOPLE OF ENGLAND,

ON THE TWO SLAVERY-BILLS INTENDED TO BE
BROUGHT INTO PARLIAMENT THE PRESENT
SESSIONS.



PEOPLE of ENGLAND!

THE day is at length arrived, when you must either listen to the voice of reason, or surrender, through your supine obstinacy; every boasted privilege, which you have so long enjoyed as Englishmen!—You have been long enough deluded!—When the death-blow is struck at your liberties, you are called upon by the imperious summons of duty to yourselves, and to your posterity, to recollect the character of your country, and to approve yourselves deserving of the blessings transmitted to you by your immortal ancestors!

To neglect the preservation of our security from despotism, nay our very existence, is absurdly criminal. There are subjects on which it is unpleasant to address you, but to be silent in the season

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season of danger, and of alarm, when every heart is beating with anxiety and apprehension, is to be subdued by false delicacy, and tends to promote that criminality. Permit me then, my countrymen, to claim your attention to a consideration of this new Convention bill proposed to parliament by Lord Grenville, and are our tongues to be forbidden to discharge their wonted functions, and the liberty of the press be utterly destroyed, to warn you, if this bill passes into a law, of the destruction you have permitted to be brought upon yourselves.

The chief object of this bill is to check the communication of opinions, and to restrain the freedom of the press. On recollecting the late attempts to crush sedition (for so it was said), on recollecting the various prosecutions for seditious language, to which every class of individuals have been exposed, and the unprecedented punishments, which have been inflicted on conviction of those modern offences, it is astonishing that the legislature should all on a sudden think it necessary to make further provisions against the progress of this newly invented crime. Have offences of this nature increased?—No. We never hear of them now. Is not the confinement of Holt and Winterbottom in Newgate, the one for publishing, the other for preaching, what has been pronounced, seditious opinions, sufficient examples to deter us from disloyalty, and the use of disaffected sentiments? Have we forgotten poor Muir, and Palmer, and Gerrald, and the other Scotch Patriots?—Yet notwithstanding the severities with which the law is already armed against the seditious, notwithstanding the appalling examples before our eyes of pillory, four years imprisonment, and fourteen years transportation to Botany Bay, punishment is to be invested in more sanguinary robes, and a new law is to be enacted, the disgrace of those who bring it forward in parliament, and the ruin of this country if the people suffer it to be carried into force.

People!

People! are you aware of the privileges which will be torn away from you by this new law? Are you aware that it will degrade you to a level with the most abject slaves under the vilest tyrannic government? Are you aware that it will tear to pieces your Magna Charta, the great charter of your liberties, of which your forefathers were so patriotically jealous, that they in the reign of one prince had it recognized at twenty different periods? By this law that illustrious charter will be sacrificed —perhaps for ever! You dare not speak, you dare not communicate, either by conversation or the press your sentiments. You dare not assemble together to complain against abuses, or to petition for redress! You must bear in silence every insult, every contumely, and every oppression; for your governors by this law will arrogate to themselves the power of arbitrarily tyrannizing over you, to the extent of their ambition, and all the consolation they leave to you will be, the privilege of receiving your patience in enduring, and your charity in forgiving, the calamities and wrongs their inhumanity may inflict on you.

People! this is not to be borne! We must not so be defrauded of our rights, of our inalienable rights! You, I am convinced, would never yourselves make this surrender! Suffer not then your unworthy representatives to make this surrender for you! From their virtue you have nothing to expect. From their complaisance to Mr. Pitt and Lord Grenville, you have every thing to dread. It is to your own firmness, and patriotism that you have to look for justice, and support, do not desert yourselves. Be no longer deluded.

The liberty of petitioning for relief from oppression is the keystone on which this constitution rests. The constitution was never intended to support alone the prerogatives of the crown; it was established for your happiness, and to confirm that happiness, the
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king was placed on the English throne. Deny us the privilege of remonstrating against the wickedness of unprincipled ministers, (and the ministers of every prince are too frequently unprincipled) and instantly the chief magistracy assumes the most horrid complexion, and becomes the engine of the most grading despotism. The subjects are trampled under its blood-stained feet with unfeeling barbarity, and its decrees written in blood, are enacted. Not to punish guilt, and to protect innocence, but to satiate a thirsty, and cruel appetite of administering torture, and death, instead of the blessings of benevolence, philanthropy, mercy and humanity!

Shall we then, Britons, endure to be so vilely treated? Shall we brook such indignities to our national character? Shall we, O Hampden and Russel, so disgrace your names, and render ourselves so undeserving of your spirited and pure exertions? No, let us tell ministers that they are the enemies to the constitution, while they call us its enemies. It is they, O people, who are overturning the constitution, at the very moment that they are laying the charge at our doors. Who have done that constitution the more fatal injury, they, or you? They who have attacked it in every part—they who have so encroached upon our rights, that scarcely one right remains to us unviolated—they who have introduced into this country Foreign Troops without the consent of parliament—they who have built barracks in every county in the kingdom—they who have made us an armed nation, and attempted to over-awe opinions by the sword, the musket, and the bayonet—they who have suspended the Habeas Corpus Act—lastly, they who are now on the eve of passing into a law this most detested bill, which in more honest, and braver days would have sounded through this nation the deadly trumpet of insurrection and rebellion—or you, illustrious and undaunted FEW, who amid persecution and peril, have
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held an unshaken course, and have panted in your career of patriotism, and of glory for that reform, which is to restore the constitution to its primitive purity, which is to stop the overwhelming stream of corruption, and which is to make your fellow-subjects honest, industrious, contented, happy, and flourishing.

You must all remember that attacks have been recently made, and with the consent of many of you, on your liberties, under the imposing pretext that it was necessary a part of your freedom should be given up for the preservation of the remainder. You were *then* told that a conspiracy did exist against the existing government of this country, and the protecting Habeas Corpus Act was smuggled away from you. That falsehood the voice of three honest juries manifested, and developed—you are *now* told, that a conspiracy exists against the life of the sovereign, and to avert the intended, and meditated danger, your lips are to be closed, and the press to be put under a ministerial inquisition.—Thus will ministers be permitted to pursue their profligate course without molestation—to goad you with persecutions—to overwhelm you with taxes and burthens—to spill your blood, and squander away your honest and hard-acquired earnings in subsidizing Foreign despots, and carrying on a state of unjust and unprofitable warfare, while you will be insulted without being told, that this is improving your situation, promoting your prosperity, and preserving the blessings conferred on you by your celebrated constitution! This will be called the preservation of the constitution itself!

People! the natural rights of man (and such are the liberty of speech and exercise of reason) can never be attacked but by tyrants. They are the gifts of God. They were given to mankind to cement together the bonds of society, by intercourse
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of sentiments, and communication of opinions. They were given him too for his protection. Rob him of them, and in dignity you degrade him with the beast. You enslave him. You revive in him the exploded doctrine of divine right, and passive obedience, and you render him the easy slave of tyrants. History tells us but for the free exercise of these blessings, the rights of man would never have been ascertained and claimed, despotism would never have been understood, "for which Sidney bled in the field, and Russel on the scaffold." As liberty is the offspring of them, so when they are snatched away from us, liberty must follow in their train. There never was, there never can be a nation, which enjoys the unviolated exercise of its rights, on which silence is imposed, and to which discussion is denied. Ignorance is sister of slavery, and whenever a tyrant wishes to abandon himself to the lust of dominion, his first step is to reduce and degrade his subjects to a state of ignorance; and he can accomplish this alone by cutting off that social intercourse, and unrestrained exchange of opinions, from which all knowledge, all information is derived, and from whence flows the consciousness of the dignity, and rank of human nature.

To conclude—I love order, and I am a friend to peace. I am an enemy to every violent effort, and I never wish to see a change even of abuses, but by a system of mild and unoffending innovation—I disclaim the appellation of an incendiary, tho' I am attached to the happiness and rights of humankind—I would not prevent opinions to my fellow-creatures on the point of a bayonet, tho' I wish them to shake off that fatal delusion, by whose magic they have been so long reduced from their senses, and their interests.—This detested bill has not hitherto passed into a law; while therefore the power remains to me (and it will remain to me but for a short while longer, unless your timely

timely exertions, O people of England, shall preserve it!) I will conjure you not to desert yourselves, but to display the honest indignation of Englishmen at the most audacious, the most profligate, the most diabolical assault that was ever made on your existence as a free community, and will reduce you, unless firmly resisted, to servitude and despair. The inhabitants of this country have been often compelled by tyranny to speak in the language of remonstrance to the throne, and when they have spoken in the manly tone of insulted freemen, their voice has been heard, and their demands have been granted. The nation which deserts itself, will be deserted by its governors. We must therefore be true to ourselves; and since we are driven to imitate the example of our forefathers, let us imitate it with an intrepidity worthy of their children.

Let us all therefore with one voice protest against this bill—Let us address the prince who sits on the English throne, to dismiss from his council ministers who were infernal to propose for the disgrace of his reign so wicked a law!—Let us assure the prince that this law can be imposed upon us on the terms only of all his subjects impatiently praying for his death; for by his death alone the terrors of this bill will terminate, and our liberties will be restored to us!—Let us represent to him that the foundation of the constitution, is the liberty of speech, the liberty of the press, and the privilege of complaining against corruption and oppression!—Let us tell him, that all these blessings by this one law are torn away from us!—Let us remind him that he himself has sworn to preserve the English constitution unviolated!

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Let us thus, my countrymen! thus firmly, but with due respect, address the chief magistrate of Great-Britain, and let us console ourselves with this reflection, that if our petitions are unheard, or rejected, that we are Englishmen at heart, and that the power remains with ourselves to be free.

COMMON SENSE.

12th November, 1795.

